

A Historical Background of Purim: Teacher's Reference

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Grade Level: Elementary, Middle School, High School

Description:

This teacher's reference clearly explains the important historical background to the Purim story, and offers elucidation both from a hashkafic and chronological perspective. The essay includes: the spiritual decline that began many years before the Purim story; the prophecy and counting of the seventy years between the two Batei Mikdash; the downfall of Bavel; the marriage of Achashveirosh and Vashti; as well as the clarification of specific vital points of the Purim story itself. Use this resource as a reference when preparing lessons about the history of Purim. For high-school aged students, you may choose to distribute the sheets for them to read on their own, and then follow up with a class discussion or assignment.



A Historical Background of Purim

By Rabbi Dovid Sapirman
שבט תשע"ח

The spiritual highs and lows of Eretz Yehuda

The story of Purim starts long before the actual episodes recorded in Megilas Esther. We will try to supply some of the historical background that will shed light on the Purim narrative.

The first Bais Hamikdash stood for four hundred and ten years. During that era, there were times of spiritual strength and also times of great weakness. Generally, it all depended on the king. When the kings of the house of Dovid were righteous, they upheld the laws of the Torah and taught the people to abide by it. However, there were some wicked kings in the dynasty of Bais Dovid, who supported idol worship and other evil practices. In the hundred and fifty years leading up to the churban, there were three major instances of kings who corrupted the people and led them astray. In the first two of such instances, a king that was a great tzadik followed after the previous rosha, and endeavored to undo all the harm that had been perpetrated before him. Achaz worshipped idols and forcibly closed the Bais Hamikdash. He did not allow children to learn Torah, in the hope that there would be no future talmidei chchomim. After this terrible decline, his son Chizkiyahu initiated a massive campaign to teach Torah to the entire people and restore the Bais Hamikdash to its former glory. He was very successful at the time, but when Chizkiyahu died, his son Menashe, (who reigned for fifty five years), and his grandson Amon, coerced the people into idol worship, and even murdered anyone who stood in their way. The Tanach attributes the churban to the sins of Menashe, who corrupted the people.

The last truly righteous king of Yehuda was Yoshiyahu, son of Amon. He, too, made every effort to undo all the harm that his father and grandfather had wrought. He was not completely successful, because, unbeknown to him, there was still much avoda zara being performed in secret. With his death, a downslide began for the next twenty two years, leading up to the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash, Yerushalayim, and Galus Bavel. When Yoshiyahu was killed in battle by the army of Pharaoh, the people anointed Yehoachaz, Yoshiyahu's son, to sit on the throne of Yehuda. Yehoachaz was imprisoned by Pharaoh and died in Egypt, after a reign of only three months. Pharaoh coronated his brother Yehoyakim to be king in his place. Yehoyakim was one of the worst kings that ever reigned in Yehuda, and did everything to literally spite Hashem and Torah. His reign lasted eleven years, and greatly intensified the spiritual decline in the land. All the above took place in a span of about one hundred and fifty years, and now we can begin to discuss the events that led directly up to the episode of Purim.

Nevuchadnetzar comes on the scene

Nineteen years prior to the destruction of Yerushalayim, Nevuchadnetzar conquered Ninveh and began his reign. Just one year later he came to Yerushalayim and overpowered it. Yehoyakim was subservient to Nevuchadnetzar for three years, but then rebelled. After a three year rebellion, Nevuchadnetzar came back and took away Yehoyakim, who died on his way out of Yerushalayim. At this time, the very first stage of

our exile occurred. Boys of the royal family were taken to Nevuchadnetzar's palace, to be trained as servants in the royal retinue. Among these boys were Doniel, Chananya, Mishael and Azarya. This all took place eleven years prior to the churban.

After Yehoyakim's death, Nevuchadnetzar installed his son, whom he renamed Yechanya, as the new king. When Nevuchadnetzar returned to Bavel for his victory parade, his cabinet told him that it is not wise to put the son of a rebel on the throne, for it is certain that he, too, will rebel. Nevuchadnetzar returned to Yerushalayim and demanded that they hand over Yechanya to him, which they had no choice but to do. Yechanya was carted off to Bavel, where he remained imprisoned for the next thirty seven years.

Galus Yechanya

At this same time, Nevuchadnetzar exiled about ten thousand Jews besides another group of one thousand, which the Tanach refers to as the "Charash and the Masger." They were the top talmidei chachomim in Yerushalayim, including people such as Mordechai Hatzadik and the novi Yechezkel. "Charash" means that when they spoke words of Torah everyone was silent and listened, and "Masger" means that when they felt that a subject was closed and unclear to them, there was no one who could reopen it and resolve it. Now Yerushalayim was depleted of any source of spiritual guidance, and the next eleven years were a time of very accelerated decline.

Although this was a terrible tragedy at the time, both for those who remained in Yerushalayim and for those who went into exile, the Gemora tells us that it was a great kindness from Hashem. When the rest of the nation went into Galus Bavel eleven years later, the chachomim who had been exiled earlier had already settled in and set up yeshivos, so that they could now be available to teach Torah to the new group of exiles. Bavel remained a main center of Torah for well over a thousand years.

Yirmiyahu Hanovi's letter

When this large group went into exile, Yirmiyahu Hanovi sent them a letter, in which he advised them to prepare for a very long stay in Bavel. He told them to build houses, plant vineyards and marry off their children. "Because when seventy years of Bavel are completed, I shall remember you, says Hashem." When would it come to be that the Jewish nation had been under Babylonian rule for seventy years? Since they were first conquered eighteen years before the churban, this prophecy should have come true fifty two years after the destruction of Yerushalayim. (More about this later).

The last king before the churban

When Nevuchadnetzar deposed Yechanya, he put his uncle Tzidkiyahu (another son of Yoshiyahu) on the throne. Tzidkiyahu reigned for eleven years until the churban, and was the last king of Yehuda from the house of Dovid, until Moshiach will come. In the ninth year of his reign, the siege by Bavel began on Asarah B'teves, and lasted for two and a

half years. When the Babylonians finally broke through the wall, they destroyed the Bais Hamikdash, perpetrated a massive slaughter, and burnt down the city of Yerushalayim. At this time, they force-marched all the remaining Jews to Bavel. This was the beginning of what we call Galus Bavel.

Eretz Yisroel becomes deserted

Nevuchadnetzar allowed some of the poorest elements of Yehuda to remain in the land and cultivate it under his appointed governor, Gedalia ben Achikam. A jealous rival had him assassinated, and all the remaining Jews fled to Egypt. Now Eretz Yehuda was totally devoid of human habitation, and remained so for fifty two years.

Calculations and miscalculations

Although the ancient nations were never willing to submit to the will of Hashem, they were always wary of the promises of the prophets. They did not want the Jewish people to be redeemed, and were aware and concerned about the prediction that a redemption would come after seventy years. Fifty one years after the churban, Balshatzar, the last king of Bavel, a wicked grandson of Nevuchadnetzar, held a magnificent ball to celebrate Persia's retreat after a battle between Bavel and Persia. He mistakenly thought that the seventy year deadline had already passed, and since the Jewish people had not been redeemed, it meant that G-d was not carrying through on His promise. Therefore, he spitefully dressed himself in the garments of the Kohen Gadol, and used the vessels of the Bais Hamikdash in which to serve wine to his guests. A mysterious hand appeared from nowhere and wrote a cryptic message on the wall. No one could decipher it, so Doniel was called to do so. He told them that the message was that tonight is the last night of Bavel's kingdom. Indeed, that night Persia returned, Balshatzar was killed, and Bavel now became a mere province in the greater Persian empire. Vashti, the king's daughter and a great-grand-daughter of Nevuchadnetzar, was found hiding during the attack. Daryavesh took her and had her married to one of his servants, none other than Achashverosh.

The downfall of Bavel

This defeat by the combined armies of Persia and Mede took place fifty one years after the churban of the Bais Hamikdash. The king of Persia was Koresh, the king of Mede was his father in law Daryavesh (the first). Out of deference to his father in law, Koresh let Daryavesh be the emperor of the new empire. Daryavesh lived only one more year, and when he died Koresh became the emperor of the entire Persian empire.

Fulfillment of an ancient prophecy

Although not Jewish, Koresh had cried and groaned over the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash. It is therefore not surprising that Heaven chose him to initiate the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdash. Long before the events recorded here, the Novi Yeshaya had

predicted that a great king would arise, Koresh by name, who would allow the Jewish people to resettle Yerushalayim and to rebuild the Bais Hamikdash. About two hundred years later, Koresh was shown the scroll, verified its authenticity, and was greatly impressed. He understood that this was a message from G-d with which he must comply. At this time, it was exactly fifty two years after the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash, which corresponded exactly with the predicted seventy years from the time Bavel had first conquered Eretz Yehuda. The prophecy of Yirmiyahu, that when seventy years of Bavel have been completed Hashem would remember them, was being actualized precisely at the appointed time.

Koresh announced to all his people, "So said Koresh, king of Persia: The G-d of Heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He commanded me to build His house in Yerushalayim in Yehuda." He granted permission that any Jew who wants to leave his country to go up to Yerushalayim may do so, and may also build the house of the G-d of Israel in Yerushalayim. He allotted funds for the rebuilding, and returned the vessels of the Bais Hamikdash which Nevuchadnetzar had plundered. He even commanded his subjects to help fund the poor Jews who didn't have the means to travel to Yerushalayim.

It is hard to imagine the joy the Jewish people must have felt when they heard this proclamation. They had suffered for so long, prior to and during the churban, and throughout the long and bitter exile. Here was the novi's promise come true. The redemption is at hand!

Koresh is rewarded

Earlier, when Nevuchadnetzar had been about to die, he did not want to leave over his wealth to his son. He loaded all his riches in boats made of copper and hid them under the waters of the Euphrates River. On the very day that Koresh granted permission for Bnei Yisroel to return and rebuild, he was granted a heavenly reward. The location of all these treasures was revealed to him, and he retrieved them.

Zerubavel

Immediately after the announcement, Jews began preparing for a return to the land of their forefathers. Their leader at the time was Zerubavel, a descendant of Yechanya Hamelech. It had been foretold that because of Yechanya's evilness he would never have any descendants that would sit on the throne. Nevertheless, Zerubavel did descend from him, because Yechanya did teshuva while in prison in Bavel. The decree was rescinded, and eventually Moshiach will descend from him.

The first Aliyah

Zerubavel was appointed by Koresh to be the official governor of Yehuda. The first group that volunteered to go to Eretz Yisroel under his leadership consisted of over forty thousand Yidden. They all went back to resettle the towns and cities from which their ancestors had been exiled. Not so many were living in Yerushalayim.

This first group included some of the greatest men in our history. Among others, there were Doniel, Mordechai, Chagai, Zecharya, Malachi, and the aforementioned chachomim known as the Charash V'hamasger.

On the first Rosh Hashana after their arrival, they built a mizbeach on its original site and began bringing korbanos, (which was permissible even without a Bais Hamikdash). By the following Iyar, they had already laid the foundation of the Bayis Sheni amidst great rejoicing.

Something goes wrong

History, however, is in the hands of the Creator, Whose agenda, we shall yet see, was quite different. Therefore, things did not turn out the way the Jewish people anticipated. The Jews had many enemies who were eager to slander them to the king, among them the Kusim. They arranged for Koresh to walk through the neighborhood where the Jews who had returned to Eretz Yehuda had previously lived. He saw the workshops of silversmiths and goldsmiths boarded up. When he inquired as to why these stores were closed, they told him that these were the shops of the Jews whom he had allowed to immigrate. Now Koresh rescinded his permission. He announced that anyone who had already gone could stay in Yehuda and Yerushalayim, but that the border would once again become closed.

This retraction by Koresh caused great disillusionment for the Jewish people. How could they, shorthanded as they were, rebuild the Bais Hamikdash without reinforcements from Bavel? Hadn't Yirmiyahu foretold that the redemption was to occur at this time? Could it be possible that the Creator was so angry with them that He no longer wanted to redeem them?

Even Doniel was in error

Not only were the masses of our people expecting the geulah to come at this time, but even the great Doniel was also waiting for it. When it didn't happen, he fasted and dovened to Hashem to reveal to him when the geulah would finally come. It was told to him in a vision that the redemption would come, not seventy years after the initial conquest by Bavel, but rather seventy years from the destruction of Yerushalayim. The exile was an atonement for the seventy Shmita and Yovel years that the people had not kept properly. Therefore, the land had to lie fallow a full seventy years before the yeshuah would come.

Two contradictory prophecies resolved

Nevertheless, there seemed to be a contradiction in the prophecies. Was the redemption supposed to come seventy years after Bavel's first conquest of Yehuda as stated by Yirmiyahu, or was it scheduled for seventy years from the destruction of Yerushalayim? There was, after all, an eighteen year discrepancy between the two predictions. The Gemora resolves the seeming contradiction. Yirmiyahu's prediction that "after seventy years I will remember you" had indeed come true. However, it was not intended to be the

final geulah, with the completed rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdash and the full return to Eretz Yisroel. It would merely be "a remembrance," a reminder from Heaven that the geulah is to come, but nothing more. This reminder was fulfilled when Koresh allowed the initial group to return and begin the building, after Yehuda had lain as a waste land for fifty two years. But the full geulah would not come until eighteen years later, when they would indeed complete the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdash, and larger numbers of Jews would return to the land.

All was foretold

Ramban in his commentary on Chumash tells us that the tochacha in B'chukosai predicts the destruction of the first Bais Hamikdash. He shows how all of the above mentioned events were alluded to in the verses about this galus. The pasuk says that Hashem will remember His covenant with the forefathers, but then goes on to mention events that would happen during the galus, until the land appeases for the broken Sabbatical years. Following this, the pasuk says, He will remember the covenant that He made with the ones whom He took out of Mitzrayim. First a mere remembrance, no promise of return. Then continued galus, till the land appeases for the Sabbatical years, and finally the exodus and return. No surprises, all was foretold.

Achashverosh usurps the throne

Koresh died not long after he retracted his permission to go up to Yerushalayim. Through scheming and bribes, Achashverosh became the next emperor of Persia, along with Vashti as his queen. In the very beginning of his reign, the enemies of the Jewish people banded together and wrote a "hate letter" to Achashverosh. They warned him that if the Jews are allowed to rebuild their temple and the city of Yerushalayim, they will surely rebel against him and refuse to pay him any taxes. After all, they said, Yerushalayim had always been the seat of mighty kings, who endeavored to overpower other nations. They stated that their only concern was for the honor of the king, and that no loss should happen to the royal treasury.

When Achashverosh read the letter, he showed it to Vashti. She told him emphatically that they should never allow the rebuilding of what her ancestor Nevuchadnetzar had destroyed. An official decree came from Achashverosh, explicitly forbidding any further construction of the Bais Hamikdash or Yerushalayim. From that moment on, all work of rebuilding ceased, until the rise of King Daryavesh II.

Disappointment and despair

Imagine how discouraged the Jewish nation must have been at this time. They still had no inkling as to why the full geulah had not come at the time Yirmiyahu had predicted. From the brief moment of exultation they had felt upon Koresh's initial decree, things had only gone from bad to worse.

The Purim story

Everyone knows the Purim story, so there is no need to repeat it here. However, there are some vital underlying points that deserve to be addressed.

The gala party

Just as Balshatzer before him, Achashverosh was also concerned about the prophetic prediction that the Jewish people would be redeemed. He didn't want them to leave his jurisdiction, so he calculated when the seventy promised years would have passed. Just as Balshatzer had miscalculated, so did Achashverosh. He mistakenly thought that the appointed time had already passed in the third year of his reign. However, he wasn't taking any chances. He feared that maybe the Jewish G-d may still change his mind and take his people back unto Him. So he consulted Haman, the man most expert on how to bring a michshol to Am Yisroel, and arouse the disfavor of Hakadosh Baruch Hu. The Midrash says that Haman came with a great plot against Yisroel.... Haman said to Achashverosh, "The G-d of these people despises immorality." Haman advised him to invite the Jews to a party, and make the atmosphere at the party very indecent. Do not force the Jews to attend, so that they can be held responsible. Then you can be certain that their G-d will never take them back.

Mordechai warns

Mordechai understood Achashverosh's intention, and warned the Jews not to go so that the Satan would not be able to accuse them, but they didn't listen. Eighteen thousand and nine hundred Jews went to the party. They ate, drank, and behaved improperly. Then the Satan brought this accusation before Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Although Haman's decree to annihilate the Jewish people did not come until nine years later, but Mordechai had been right. The decree was indeed made because "they had taken pleasure from the seudah of Achashverosh." Had the people attended the party out of fear of insulting the king, but nevertheless felt disgust over the goings-on at the party, they would not have been held so guilty. But for them to disobey Mordechai's warning, and actually enjoy themselves at a party which is the antithesis of what a Jew is supposed to be, was considered by heaven a heinous crime. There lies herein a great lesson for us in our times, that Hashem Yisborach is indeed very displeased when our moral standard is not up to par.

An old sin finally catches up

Long before the events recorded in Megilas Esther, the Jewish people had not lived up to the heavenly standard expected of them. Nevuchadnetzar had erected a statue sixty cubits high and commanded everyone in his empire to bow to it. Everyone bowed, including Am Yisroel, with the exception of three tzadikim, Chananya, Mishael and Azarya. Although according to many Rishonim bowing to the statue was merely giving reverence to the king and was not a true avodah zarah, but since it had all the trappings of idol worship, and was similar enough to feel as if they were bowing to avodah zarah, they

were held guilty. For that reason, Chananya, Mishael and Azarya chose to give their lives al kiddush Hashem, and the rest of the people should have done the same. The Gemora states that Haman's decree of annihilation was sanctioned in heaven for these dual sins: bowing to Nevuchadnetzar's statue, and having hana'ah and pleasure from the indecent seudah of Achashverosh.

Mordechai's message to the people

When Mordechai heard about the gezeira, and was informed by Eliyahu Hanovi that it had indeed been decreed in heaven, he ripped his clothing and went out in the street screaming. This was no spontaneous act of hysteria. Not at all. Mordechai communicated to the Jewish people precisely what needs to be done under the circumstances: teshuva and tefila. His message was very clear: Not thru protests, bribing officials or political maneuvers will this decree be averted. There is no other way out than teshuva and tefila. The people understood his message very well. That is what the Megilah means when it states that everywhere the Jews heard about the decree there was great mourning with fasting and crying. They rushed to the shuls to plead for mercy. The decree was having the desired effect: to bring the people back to their Creator.

How great was the removal of the signet ring

The prophets had been rebuking the people long before the destruction of Yehuda. They didn't do teshuva then, and they weren't doing teshuva now. It was so easy to just shrug off the words of the prophets, and go about their merry business. Accepting fault and making change are among the hardest things for a person to do. But there was one thing that could not be ignored. When Achashverosh took off his ring and gave it to Haman to seal the decree, the people were so shaken up that they actually were receptive to Mordechai's instructions. So said the chachomim, "The removal of the ring was greater than forty eight prophets and seven prophetesses who had given prophecy to Yisroel. None of them were able to bring them back to the good path, but the removal of the ring brought them back to the good path."

Bewilderment and fright

It is hard to imagine the intensity of fright that our people must have felt when Haman's evil decree was announced. Not only was the threat of annihilation hanging over their heads, but even their characteristic optimism and trust in Hashem's help was very weakened. After all, hadn't the fulfillment of the prophecy that they were anticipating not materialized? Now there was even a decree of total destruction. There were still nevi'im alive amongst them, but there had not been a single message of encouragement forthcoming from them. There were certainly some among them, as mentioned in the book of Yechezkel, who considered it possible that Hashem had cast them off, as a husband who divorces his wife or a master who sells his slave. Without question, the disappointment of the unfulfilled promise fueled that belief.

The eternal covenant

The story of Purim is actually the story of Klal Yisroel's promised eternal survival. At the time of the Purim story, basically the entire Jewish nation was under the rule of Achashverosh. Had Haman been able to carry out his threat, it would have meant the destruction of the totality of Am Yisroel. However, in the Torah itself we have been promised that Hashem will never break his covenant with us by allowing us to perish. "Even when they are in the lands of their enemies, I will not loathe them or reject them to destroy them, to nullify my covenant with them, for I am Hashem their G-d." The prophets told us that the Jewish people will be Hashem's chosen nation as long as the sun, the moon and the stars will exist. The mountains may depart, but Hashem's bris will be with us eternally.

Making the connection

One of the great lessons from the story of Purim is that the heavenly response to what we do is not always immediate, and hence not always obvious. The sin of bowing to Nevuchadnetzar's statue happened many decades earlier, and the decree of Haman came nine years after they had gone to the party. Nevertheless, the shock of threatened annihilation made them realize that they must look for the Hashgacha connection through the counsel of Torah, in this case Mordechai Hatzadik.

Their fasts and their outcry

Just as the cause of the calamity must be determined through Torah insights, the solution must also come from Above. The weaponry of Am Yisroel is not like that of other nations. "These are with chariots, these with horses, but we recite the name of Hashem." At the end of the Megila, when summing up the story, the pasuk says, "דברי הצומות וזעקתם." This is the story of *the fasting and their outcry*. It was only with z'chus of the tefilos and the teshuva that Mordechai and Esther were able to bring about a yeshua. We must never lose sight of this vital message.

From the mouths of the children

There is so much to learn from Purim that this short historical essay could go on and on, which of course is impractical. Let us therefore close with the words of the Midrash Raba. "R' Abba bar Kahana said, 'there never arose philosophers in the world as Bilam ben Beor and Avnimus the tailor. The nations all gathered to him and said, 'Can we start up with this nation (the Jews)?' He said, 'Go around to their synagogues and study halls. If you find children there chirping with their voices, you are unable to start up with them. For so their father promised them and said, 'The voice is the voice of Yaakov and the hands are the hands of Esav. When the voice of Yaakov is found in the shuls, then the hands are not the hands of Esav. If not, then the hands are the hands of Esav.'" Mordechai knew this well, and he gathered twenty two thousand cheder children in Shushan, who

were fasting, dovening and learning. In the slichos of Ta'anis Esther we recite that their learning was the turning point in the story.

Everything that happens in history is the Divine plan of the Hashgacha. Both the tzaros and the salvation follow an exact plan, although sometimes concealed from us. It was the will of Hashem to give us the opportunity to return to Him through the fright of the g'zaira, and it was indeed the teshuva and the tefilos, both ours and the children's which wrought the yeshuah. May we once again commit ourselves fully to Hashem Yisborach's Torah, and may He soon bring an end to our galus בביאת גואל צדק במהרה בימינו. Amen!